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SUBJECT: FOOD SECURITY SITUATION IN ZIMBABWE

SUMMARY

¶1. National assessments show that maize yield from the 2008 harvest is the lowest on record; sorghum yield was only 60 percent of last year's harvest. The Government of Zimbabwe (GOZ) must overcome severe forex shortages and generate political will to mobilize resources to meet the country's cereals shortfall. As a result of the critical food shortages in country, Zimbabweans are resorting to traditional coping mechanisms earlier than usual. CSAF and WFP are registering families to provide large scale food distributions towards the end of October. According to the FAO and farmers' unions, there is a critical shortage of both seeds and fertilizer in the country. It is too late to procure, ship, and distribute these inputs as they need to be in the farmers' hands by the end of October for planting with the first rains. Instead, the FAO recommends trying to provide inputs for the second planting in January/February for roots, tubers, wheat, legumes and seed production. FAO strongly recommends donors and NGOs start planning now for the 2009-2010 agricultural season. END SUMMARY.

GENERAL FOOD SECURITY SITUATION

¶2. According to national assessments, the 2008 national average yield of maize production was the lowest on record at 270 kg per hectare and only about 40 percent of that in 2007 (600 kg/ha). The previous lows (150-160 percent of 2008's yield), in 1992 and 2002, were years of extreme drought. The exceptionally low yield in 2008 is largely attributed to late planting due to untimely and inadequate delivery of agricultural inputs, lack of working capital and fuel, and poor condition of draught animals following the drought in 2007. Fertilizer was unavailable. The estimated 2008 sorghum yield (205 kg/ha) was 60 percent of last year's and the third lowest recorded from 1980.

¶3. Estimates for international food aid requirements assumed that the bulk of the deficit would be covered by government imports. This is increasingly unlikely. The GOZ said earlier this year that it would import 800,000 MT, but its performance will depend on political will and access to hard currency. At the monthly FAO Agricultural Coordination Meeting last week, FAO reported that the GOZ had imported 250,000 MT to date. At a meeting with the WFP, senior government officials indicated that they may not be able to pay for earlier commitments for commodities. Furthermore, the GOZ's Grain Marketing Board (GMB) distribution system is extremely inefficient, leaving many parts of the country without consistent access to grains. Moreover, the GMB is subject to political manipulation at the local level. A private sector supply system is illegal as the GMB has a statutory monopoly on all imported grains. Efforts by NGOs and WFP can help, but not fully replace this system.

¶4. Reports from many rural areas indicate already poor, and further declining, availability of cereal. In some areas, availability should improve marginally after the rains begin and agriculture resumes, as farmers who produced in excess of their needs begin to pay out their surplus to casual laborers. Due to the national shortage of cash, barter has become common in rural areas. In the urban areas, cash withdrawal limits imposed by the Reserve Bank of Zimbabwe (RBZ) and banks inability to supply cash add to people's difficulties in purchasing the little food that is available.

¶5. Coping mechanisms include reducing meals and portions, increased reliance on wild fruits, and increased selling of livestock. Divestment of too many livestock will only knock households further back, resulting in higher numbers in need of food aid and a longer recovery period to food security and stabilized livelihoods.

¶6. Despite all these indications of cereal shortages, the most recent nutritional surveillance data (July 2008) showed that malnutrition among young children remains well below emergency levels, i.e. almost normal, in the seven districts surveyed, which were chosen because they previously showed indications of a rising trend. The failure of this traditional indicator to indicate extreme crisis could be partially due to cultural intra-household practices that tend to direct food to protect the young.

¶7. However, there are other factors that could lead to overestimates of the country's cereal deficit. Most likely is that the national requirement for cereal has been grossly overestimated due to an overblown population figure. Estimates of deficits have been based on populations extrapolated from the last census (2002), and the reliability of this census is questionable (subject to political manipulation and under-resourcing of census takers). Also, no account has been taken of the large scale out-migration from Zimbabwe. Other factors not considered are the potential effect of AIDS mortality exacerbated by poor access to health care and shortage of health care providers and drugs.

¶8. The food security technical group also believes that informal cross-border trade of cereals and other food has not been adequately considered. FEWSNET tracking does not capture the small quantities imported by the hundreds of thousands that cross the borders monthly and return with their vehicle trunks and small trailers loaded with food.

FOOD AID

¶9. The GOZ's nearly three-month ban on NGO field operations was lifted at the end of August. Both WFP and CSAFE are now registering and verifying vulnerable families throughout the country for free food distribution. Few access problems have been reported. Large scale distribution will be phased in, with the first distributions expected in mid to late October once the registration/verification process is completed. CSAFE school-based feeding for pre- and primary-school children in rural areas is at nearly 100 percent capacity, despite high teacher absenteeism, because the program does not depend on teacher participation. School aged children (3-14 years) are welcomed to eat whether they attend classes or not.

¶10. USAID/FFP has contributed 151,500 MT of food to CSAFE and WFP valued at USD 175 million in FY08. As USAID/FFP is contributing more than 65 percent of WFP's current pipeline; additional resource requests will be scrutinized closely. Approximately 47,000 MT of CSAFE food has already arrived in Durban and is being delivered to Zimbabwe as fast as possible utilizing 30-ton trucks.

¶11. WFP has issued a local appeal to help cover a USD 151 million shortfall. In their response to the appeal, the EU and the Governments of the UK, Sweden, Japan, Germany, the Netherlands, and Canada indicated last week that they planned further contributions to WFP given it was too late to fund seed and fertilizer distribution programs for this year.

2008/2009 AGRICULTURAL SEASON

¶12. There are major shortfalls in both seeds and fertilizers for the quickly approaching agricultural season. The UN/FAO and Commercial Farmers' Union of Zimbabwe estimate that 10,000 MT of maize seeds are available against a 30,000 plus MT requirement. Further, 18,500 MT of fertilizer are available against a 167,000 MT requirement.

¶13. The consensus of FAO, numerous donors including USAID/OFDA, and NGOs is that it is too late to bring in seeds and fertilizers for the 2008/2009 cereal season. Insufficient time exists for seed/fertilizer procurement, transport, registration, and distribution to enable planting before the first rains. The Southern Africa Regional Climate Outlook Forum (SARCOF) forecast for this year predicts normal to above-normal rainfall in October-December, but normal to below-normal rainfall in January-March. This means that farmers must plant early - by the first rains (approximately November 15) - if they are to have a decent harvest. Planting after that date, even with the best seeds and inputs, will produce extremely low crop yields. Donor investment should instead focus on preparing for next year's season and on mitigating some of the shortfall through programs that support the January/February planting season of roots, tubers, wheat, legumes and seeds and that provide top dressing fertilizer.

¶14. The prevalence and types of disease among livestock have been steadily increasing over the past few years, and the GOZ vet extension workers are immobilized by the current economic conditions (inadequate salaries and lack of vehicles, fuel and livestock drugs). In addition, livestock diseases increase during the rainy season. FAO is convening a meeting with the major donors on October 6 to discuss agricultural sector priorities for the next 12-month period.

WHAT CAN BE DONE NOW?

¶15. Planning and preparations for the 2009/2010 season should start now and include:

- Seed production support for next year. It should be kept in mind that if prices are too low, like now, farmers will not be interested in producing seed.
- Assistance with the supply of fertilizer and seeds/cuttings for the February 2009 planting (sugar beans, Michigan peas, cow peas, wheat, sweet potato and cassava).
- Expansion of initiatives underway in rural irrigation schemes, dams, and boreholes combined with conservation agriculture interventions and expansion of irrigated gardens. At present, a large segment of the rural population is surviving off their gardens.
- Supporting livestock and agriculture extension services. There are currently 7,000 immobile Agritex Officers who are unable to work due to lack of fuel.
- Strengthening and tapping into the expertise of farmers' unions.

¶16. The OFDA Regional Advisor is consulting with NGOs and FAO on providing support for interventions for the February planting season as well as potential agricultural activities over the next 12-months.

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